

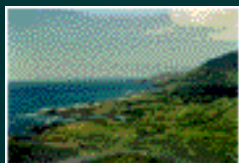


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HUMPBACK WHALES

Hawai`i Culture

A Traditional Hawaiian Chant

A Cultural Perspective of Whales and the Native People of Hawai`i

The Kohola and the Kolea

A Traditional Hawaiian Chant

Recited by Kahu (Rev.) Charles Kauluwehi Maxwell Sr.
(a.k.a. "Uncle Charlie")



Kahu (Rev.) Charles
Kauluwehi Maxwell Sr.
(a.k.a. "Uncle Charlie")



Click [here](#) to listen to a recording of a traditional Hawaiian chant.

Translation:

*Give to me all your knowledge from
above,*

All those intricacies of the songs,

Invoke these things upon me,

Invoke these things upon me.

Click [here](#) for more information about
Uncle Charlie and Hawaiian storytelling.



HAWAII CULTURE



SENATOR AKAKA



REFLECTIONS



A Cultural Perspective of Whales and the Native People of Hawai`i

Joylynn Oliveira, Native Hawaiian Cultural Educator
Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary

The First Voyagers

Traveling by canoe across a vast unknown body of water, Polynesian voyagers had set out on a journey that would change history forever. Arriving sometime between 500 and 750 A.D., the first voyaging canoe came ashore in Hawai`i. These seafarers had navigated their way across the deep blue Pacific sea with the aid of the natural environment, including ocean currents, stars, clouds, and the moon.

For many years, the legacy of these voyagers had established a culture that was isolated and unique (being the most isolated chain of islands in the world, the Hawaiian archipelago is secluded from the nearest continental landmass by approximately 2,500 miles). During this time, the inhabitants of the Hawaiian Islands had a self-sustained life-style. Depending only on immediate resources, the ancient Hawaiian people lived in unity and harmony with nature, believing that if they cared for the land and the sea, the land and sea would, in turn, care for them.



Amongst her many talents, Joylynn is the Native Hawaiian Cultural Educator at the sanctuary office. She also spends time educating the public about the many natural wonders that Hawai`i has to offer.

New Arrivals

This harmonious way of life was suddenly altered when British explorer Captain James Cook arrived in the islands in 1778. Cook and his crew introduced the native Hawaiians to western society. A new way of life was imprinted in the minds of the native people and westerners alike. Along with clothing, books and guns, the new arrivals also brought disease. The natives had lived a secluded life for hundreds of years and had no immunity toward the common cold, smallpox and other common ailments of the Old World. Consequently, the Hawaiian population drastically diminished in just a few years.



The hokulea, an ancient Polynesian voyaging vessel, is most likely the type of craft that the first voyagers used to discover the Hawaiian Islands.

As westerners began to spill into the islands and explore, many resources sparked their interest, among them the supply of sandalwood. Sandalwood had a strong natural fragrance and became a major export. Eventually, the natural forests were depleted and the wood became scarce.

Living in peace and harmony with nature, Hawaiians believed in a strong relationship between the plants and animals on the land and in the sea. This belief extended to include the notion of land and sea counterparts. It was thought that each counterpart

complemented the other, creating a bond between them. The Kumulipo, the Hawaiian creation chant, states, "Hanau ka palaoa noho i kai. . . Kia`i`ia e ka`aoa," which translates, "The whale is born into the sea . . . Protected by the sandalwood." This truth is mirrored in the life of the whale, which was in sync with the life of its guardian, the sandalwood. It is interesting to note that in modern times, the whales of Hawai`i have also suffered great losses and have become endangered, just as the sandalwood did more than a century ago. ([The Kohola and the Kolea \[Whale and the Plover\]](#) folktale below also illustrates the belief in a strong relationship between plants and animals on land and in the sea.)

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The Kohola and Lei Niho Palaoa

Whales, like every other creation of nature, were respected by the Hawaiian people. It was believed that deities would take the form of animals and plants, and, therefore, deserved respect. The whale, also known as the kohola, was considered to be a family deity or `aumakua. Hawaiians believed that when a powerful ancestor died, he or she took the animal form of an `aumakua and ever after guided and protected the family.

The kohola was also believed to be a manifestation of kanaloa, one of the four major demigods of Hawaiian folklore. Kanaloa was the god of the sea, and is said to be the god responsible for helping the Polynesians find Hawai`i. Some people say that the early Polynesian voyagers followed the path of the whale, which eventually led to the Hawaiian islands. Kanaloa was also the ancient name of the island of

Kaho`olawe, which appears to have the profile of a whale.

The whale was first identified as the palaoa in the Hawaiian language. Palaoa originally referred to whales in general, but later came to specifically identify both the toothed sperm whale and whale ivory. Today, the word kohola is commonly used to refer to whales, and especially the humpback whale.

Throughout recorded history, several species of whales had passed through the islands, including both baleen and toothed whales. The toothed whale, or palaoa, developed an important and significant role in Hawaiian culture. The Hawaiian proverb, "`O luna, `o lalo, `o uka, `o kai, `o ka palaoa pae -- no ke ali`i ia" translates to "Above, below, the upland, the lowland, the whale that washes ashore--all belong to the chief." This proverb refers to the authority of the royal class. On rare occasions, the carcass of a toothed whale would wash ashore, and immediately became the possession of the chief.

The ivory of the palaoa was removed and made into a niho palaoa, a whale-tooth pendant. The ivory was carved into the suggestive shape of a tongue, which may have signified someone who spoke with authority. The niho palaoa was then strung through strands of braided human hair from an ancestor, and the entire piece was known as a whale-tooth necklace, or lei niho palaoa.

The lei niho palaoa was only worn by the ali`i, or the high ruling chief, and was the second most treasured artifact. The feather cloak, also worn by the ali`i, was the most highly prized possession of all. The lei niho palaoa represented strength and power. It is said that the mana, or spirit of the gods, would be passed on to the wearer of the lei niho palaoa, as would the mana from the ancestor whose hair was used, the carver who made the piece, and all those who wore it beforehand.

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Mana and Place Names

The mana of the whale was also evident in place names throughout Hawai`i. Many areas, especially along the coastlines of the islands, had names that referred to whales. For example, Laeonakohola (Cape of the Whales) is a cape located on the western coast of the island of Kaho`olawe, which overlooks an area where humpback whales are

commonly seen. Hunananiho (Tooth Concealment) is an area located on the island of Hawai`i in the Hamakua district. It is said that at this site, the mother of the Hawaiian chief named `Umi hid a lei niho palaoa, which was given to him later in his lifetime. `Umi then became a very prominent figure in Hawaiian history.

A famous national historic site located on the island of Hawai`i is known as Pu`ukohola Heiau. A heiau is a place designated for worshipping gods, and the name of this site translates to "Hill of the Whale." The origin of the name is uncertain, but whales may have been easily observed from the site, which played an important role in Hawaiian history. It is the hill where King Kamehameha built a temple to please his family war god in hopes of one day ruling all of the Hawaiian Islands.



The dazzling peaks off the island of Kaho`olawe overlooks one of the many areas where humpback whales are commonly seen.

In his quest, Kamehameha wanted to rule the island of Hawai`i, which, at the time, was ruled by his cousin Keoua Kuahu`ula. Kamehameha searched for spiritual guidance and sent his aunt to seek direction from the prophet Kapoukahi. Kapoukahi told her that Kamehameha would conquer all of the islands if he built his war god a large heiau atop Pu`ukohola.

After hearing this prophecy, Kamehameha constructed the large heiau and followed strict guidelines ensuring that his god would be pleased. In 1791, the heiau was complete. Kamehameha invited his cousin Keoua Kuahu`ula to the dedication ceremony, and a scuffle took place, during which Keoua and most of his companions were killed. The body of Keoua was offered as the principal sacrifice to Kamehameha's war god, Kuka`ilimoku.

With the death of his cousin, Kamehameha did indeed become sole ruler of the island of Hawai`i. Soon, the larger prophesy proved true, and by 1810, Kamehameha the Great had conquered all of the Hawaiian Islands, marking a turning point in the islands' history.

Kanaloa and the Kahuna

The history of Hawai`i was not written on paper. Rather, it was preserved orally and by petroglyphs, which are picture drawings similar to hieroglyphics. Many petroglyphs contain human images as well as animal figures, which may tell a story or provide a landmark. On the islands of Lana`i and Hawai`i, petroglyphs have been identified in shapes that suggest the figures of whales. The petroglyph on Lana`i, in particular, displays the image of a whale with a human being on top of it. This petroglyph may symbolize a legend, or mo`olelo, which tells of a boy who left the islands on the back of a whale.

One version of this mo`olelo is recorded in Hawaiian folklore and offers a link between the oral tradition and the petroglyph. It also provides another connection between the deity Kanaloa and his animal figure, the whale.

In old Hawai`i there once was a kahuna (priest) named Makua who wanted his son to become a kahuna even greater than himself. Makua prayed to his two gods, Kane and Kanaloa, asking them to teach his son how to become a great kahuna. The two gods appeared one day to Makua to tell him they heard his prayers and that they would eventually send a messenger to his son. Many years passed, but no messenger appeared.

One day, while Makua and his son were working, they heard a commotion on the beach. A whale had washed ashore. All the people from the village rushed to see the amazing sight, and played on the whale's back. Makua's son was anxious to join in the excitement, but Makua was hesitant. Finally, after several days, Makua allowed his son to approach the whale.

Makua's son climbed on the whale with the other boys. As he did, the whale suddenly awoke, and everyone except him fell off. The boy was carried away on the back of the whale to the land of his father's gods. Makua mourned for the loss of his son until one evening, when his gods came to him in a dream. The gods told him that the messenger had come for his son, and that he was being taught well in their world.

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The Whale's Importance in Hawaiian Culture

This small excerpt of the history and culture of the Hawaiian Islands and its people offers a mere glimpse of the whole picture. Information about whales in the Hawaiian culture, although limited, indicates that the people of Hawai`i were always aware of the whales' presence. It is believed that the native Hawaiians neither hunted nor ate whales because the meat lacked taste. In fact, it was considered kapu, or taboo, for a commoner to possess any part of a whale.

Several views regarding the limited information about the cultural importance of whales in Hawai`i may offer insight as to why the kohola was not dominantly displayed in the culture. One view, offered by Louis Herman, Ph.D., Director of Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory in Honolulu, Hawai`i, suggests that humpback whales were not present in Hawaiian waters before the arrival of Captain Cook. Herman theorized that humpback whales may have dispersed from other areas after 1778 due to increased pressures from whaling and other long-term changes



The native Hawaiians may have viewed the whale as a very sacred creature, an animal form of the god Kanaloa.

in the major water masses of the North Pacific.

A second view suggests that, in comparison to other animals, whales were not highly important or necessary to the native Hawaiians. Many animals, such as sharks, turtles and owls, were often depicted in Hawaiian folklore and were considered to be `aumakua. It is likely that the Hawaiians' self-subsistent life-style did not create a need for the large food supply that could be obtained from a whale.

A final view suggests that the Hawaiian culture may have viewed the whale as a very sacred creature, an animal form of the god Kanaloa. Knowledge of the whale and its connection to the culture may have been reserved for the high-ranking chiefs and their priests, and as the ancestors died, so did their special understanding.

The mystery of the importance of whales to the culture of the Hawaiian people, the seafarers of the Pacific, remains unsolved. Through cultural awareness and outreach programs in the community, the sanctuary will help to preserve the remaining knowledge and may even bring forth new and exciting information. Exploring the earth above, as well as the depths below, may give the people of Hawai`i a new perspective on how their ancestors lived, and may reveal additional secrets about their heritage.

Editor's Note: The Hawaiian text on this page does not include all grammatical markings of the Hawaiian language due to computer incompatibilities. Please note that the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary is aware of the lack of these markings and will continue to remain culturally sensitive to the language, including these markings when possible.

The Kohola and the Kolea

Click on the image below to view a coloring book version of this ancient Hawaiian folktale.



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National Marine Sanctuaries

A coloring book in English and Hawaiian

March 1997
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National Marine Sanctuary

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